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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Humanitarian demining: USG program continues to build indigenous capacity in Sri Lanka

Refs: (A) 03 Colombo 1878; (B) Colombo 1488

1. (U) This message is Sensitive but Unclassified -- Please handle accordingly.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: A major State Department-sponsored humanitarian demining training initiative has been making major strides in Sri Lanka. Run by the RONCO Corporation, the program has trained over two hundred Sri Lanka Army (SLA) deminers and paramedics, and provides technical oversight to humanitarian demining tasks in Sri Lanka's war-torn north and east. The program is currently also training handlers for six Mine Detecting Dogs (MDD). This program, which has consistently garnered kudos from the SLA and the general public, is successfully building Sri Lanka's indigenous capacity for humanitarian demining. END SUMMARY.

3. (SBU) MAJOR USG DEMINING INITIATIVE: A State Department-sponsored program providing humanitarian demining training assistance to the SLA is making excellent progress. The program, which began in August 2003, is one of the largest ever in Sri Lanka. Since its inception, the program, which is valued at USD 2.2 million, has trained a total of 276 deminers, divided into two classes. Training is conducted at a SLA training school located in Embilipitya in Hambantota District in the south of the country. A third course of approximately 120 students began on March 8 and is slated to finish in early April.

4. (U) Running parallel to this third training course for deminers is a 12-week course of training for handlers of MDDs. Six MDDs, valued at USD 120,000, were donated through the Marshall Legacy Institute in early March and will be integrated into the SLA's humanitarian demining strategy.

5. (SBU) OUTSTANDING RESULTS: Since the U.S.-trained SLA personnel began their clearance tasks in late 2003, the results have been impressive: working on seven specific clearance tasks in three areas of the country, the RONCO-trained demining regiments have cleared 311,304 square meters, and removed and destroyed 637 mines and 30 pieces of unexploded ordnance (UXO). (Note: This program builds on previous U.S. demining programs in Sri Lanka -- two Quick Reaction Demining Forces, or "QRDFs" were deployed to northern Sri Lanka, one in 2002 and one in 2003, clearing over 100,000 square meters of land and destroying approximately 400 mines and UXO.)

6. (SBU) In addition to the State Department efforts, a Department of Defense-sponsored Blast Rehabilitation and Victim Assistance (BRAVA) advance team recently completed an advance trip to the northern city of Jaffna, in preparation for a two-week visit in late April, during which Army surgeons will treat landmine victims.

7. (SBU) BUILDING INDIGENOUS CAPACITY: The USG's humanitarian demining training program includes a large "train-the-trainer" element, so that the SLA can develop its own indigenous humanitarian demining training capacity (with RONCO-certified instructors conducting future courses as soon as late 2004). Another key element of the program is the donation of equipment used in demining: mine detectors, body armor, communication devices and several vehicles have been contributed to the demining initiative, which Brigadier A.M.A Chandrasiri, the commander of the SLA Engineer Brigade, told poloff on March 11 "extends the capability of our units immeasurably."

8. (SBU) In the field, RONCO personnel provide technical oversight and guidance to the SLA deminers, who are working in three areas: Jaffna and Vavuniya Districts in the north, and Trincomalee District in the east. Typically, sites that are selected for clearance are areas where Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are

attempting to return, or areas of high pedestrian traffic, such as around schools or wells. After performing technical survey operations, the teams then select sites for mine clearance based on maximum humanitarian impact, in cooperation with the local Government Agent and the UNDP. The UNDP maintains a large database of minefield maps for Sri Lanka.

¶9. (SBU) TOP-NOTCH COOPERATION WITH SLA: Cooperation between RONCO and the SLA in the field continues to be excellent. RONCO Chief of Party Fredrik Palsson told poloff on March 11 that the students' performance in the field was among the best he had seen in his career, and that he continued to be highly impressed with both the professionalism and responsiveness of the Sri Lankan military.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: Current UNDP estimates are that there are roughly one million landmines present in the north/east, along with thousands of tons of UXOs. In the past, casualties have been as high as twenty a month, but this number is decreasing, due in part to the efforts of humanitarian demining programs such as this one. Through the success of this program, as well as the results of the two earlier QRDF teams, the U.S. is seen as a major provider of much-needed assistance and a key contributor to Sri Lanka's peace process and reconciliation efforts. END COMMENT.

¶11. (U) Minimize considered.

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